



Meeting energizes freeway critics

150 residents hear strategy for fight

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The members of Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children (PARC) say they were encouraged by a weekend meeting to help galvanize support for their cause.

PARC's fund-raising efforts are under way for the effort to fight the freeway that would run through Ahwatukee Foothills and form the southwestern portion of Loop 202 if final approval is given.

The group is raising money for what could be a long and expensive legal challenge to the project. Membership dues for the organization are \$100 per person or \$250 per family.

"It's unfortunate that we're going to have to organize and fight this freeway from a legal standpoint," said Melanie Pai, president and one of the founders of PARC. "But the bottom line is Maricopa Association of Governments and our state government hasn't, to this point, taken the initiative to protect our children, our mountain, our families, our community. So we'll do it."

Pai said several grass-roots organizations had tried for more than a year to simply provide vocal opposition to the project at public meetings and hearings.

"But the petitions and the phone calls and the letters and the editorials have not gotten the response that we hoped from our elected officials and (the Arizona Department of Transportation)," Pai said. "So this is the next step."

Saturday's meeting drew about 150 area residents who gathered at the Pecos Community Center. Though most in attendance were already opposed to the project, many still found the meeting informative.

"It's good to hear from groups like this," said Leedell Bunton, who attended the meeting with his wife, Anita, and their granddaughter. "I don't feel like we're getting the whole story from ADOT. To move the freeway south a mile or two wouldn't fix the problem."

Bunton was referring to the idea of possibly realigning the freeway from along Pecos Road, which seems to be the most likely path, to a route farther south on the Gila River Reservation.

The exact route of the freeway hasn't been determined, and a decision is expected next year.

ADOT must first complete an environmental impact statement. Following that, the Federal Highway Administration gives its input.

Joe Pesetsky said it was somewhat confusing that the freeway seems to be a forgone conclusion, although no decision has been made on whether to build it and it faces much opposition.

"It's almost like you want to say, 'What are we doing here?' " Pesetsky said. "It's interesting that everyone is so firm saying it's going to happen, but nothing has really been done to make it happen."

Patrick Mondone, a Lakewood resident, spoke of the familiar complaints against the project - issues of safety, noise and pollution. He said those issues should help PARC broaden its appeal beyond Ahwatukee.

"At the very least, it's a city of Phoenix issue," Mondone said. "All of Maricopa County is going to be affected by this."